## The New Disability Historiography: Introduction

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The three essays that follow reflect the variety of emerging scholarship in disability history. They also suggest new directions for future work.

Thus far, notes Douglas Baynton in "Disability: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," "historians of disability have concentrated on writing histories of disabled people and the institutions and laws associated with disability." "It is time," he urges, "to posit disability as a fundamental element in cultural signification....not just a description of a group but the primary term in a fundamental binary opposition - 'normal' versus 'disabled',...a signifier for relations of power." As such, argues Baynton, "disability" is "indispensable for historians who want to make sense of the past" and therefore "must be resituated from the margins to the very center of humanities scholarship."

Because public policy has long been central to defining not only disability, but the social roles available to people with disabilities, policy history is central to disability history. Mark Priestley's "The Origins of a Legislative Disability Category in England: A Speculative History" seeks to revise our understanding of the historical roots of modern policy definitions. He responds to "disability theorists who have frequently employed historical arguments in an attempt to explain the administrative segregation of people with impairments in Western industrial societies." In particular, he writes, "social model theorists...have evoked a broadly materialist notion of British economic history in order to assert that the transition to an industrial mode of capitalist production was the key causal factor in excluding disabled people from participation in the labour force." Instead, Priestley finds the origins of "the process of administrative segregation...in much earlier [Tudor] attempts to control labour supply during periods of economic and political crisis."

In the final essay, "Political Movements of People with Disabilities: The League of the Physically Handicapped, 1935-1938," David Goldberger and I recount the brief history of an activist group in Depression-era America. We use that case study to call for comparative historical investigations of disability-based political organizations.

These articles and the book reviews that follow all indicate the fertile variety of scholarship in disability history and suggest new lines for further inquiry. They also point toward the need to begin to synthesize this emerging literature into a general historical interpretation.

## Disability: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis

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In her seminal 1986 essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," Joan Scott wrote that despite a substantial number of works on women's history, the topic remained

marginal in the discipline as a whole. Research on the role of women in history was, while necessary, insufficient to change the paradigms of the profession. A typical response of non-feminist historians to this work was, "women had a history separate from men's, therefore let feminists do women's history, which need not concern us," or "my understanding of the French Revolution is not changed by knowing that women participated in it." To change the paradigms of the profession required demonstrating not just that women participated in the making of history, but that "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships" and "a primary way of signifying relationships of power."[1]

Disability history faces a similar challenge. While the field is not nearly as advanced as women's history was in 1986, there is nevertheless a substantial and growing body of work that is rarely included in history textbooks, courses, or scholarly works not specifically about disability. Just as early historians of gender focused on writing histories of women, historians of disability have concentrated on writing histories of disabled people and the institutions and laws associated with disability. This is of course necessary and exciting work. It is through this work that we are building the case that disability is culturally constructed rather than natural and timeless - that disabled people have a history, and a history worth studying. It is time, however, to take the step urged by Scott in gender studies - that is, to posit disability as a fundamental element in cultural signification, indispensable for historians who want to make sense of the past. Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write. However, if "disabled" is not just a description of a group, but the primary term in a fundamental binary opposition - "normal" versus "disabled" - and if this binary opposition functions as a signifier for relations of power, then a persuasive case can be made that disability must be resituated from the margins to the very center of humanities scholarship.

Let me offer a few brief examples of what I am thinking. To demonstrate the ubiquity of gender in social thought, Scott focused on political history, a field where historians were especially apt to argue that gender was irrelevant and where I think most historians today would imagine disability to be unimportant. She chose, as an example, Edmund Burke's attack on the French Revolution and noted that it was "built around a contrast between ugly, murderous sans-culottes hags ('the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women') and the soft femininity of Marie-Antoinette." I was first drawn to this example because the contrast Scott highlights calls upon not only gender, but notions of beauty, disfigurement, and misshapen bodies that would be amenable to an analysis informed by disability. However, upon rereading portions of Burke's essay, I found that his argument rested not just upon the rhetoric of gender, but on a rhetorical contrast between the natural constitution of the body politic and the monstrous deformity that the Revolution had brought forth. Burke repeatedly referred to "public measures...deformed into monsters," "monstrous democratic assemblies," "this monster of a constitution," "unnatural and monstrous activity," and the like, as well as condemning "blind prejudice," actions taken "blindly," "blind followers," and "blind obedience," and alluding to the madness, imbecility, and idiocy of the revolutionary leaders. This rhetoric was by no means peculiar to the conservative cause. Tom Paine, in his response to Burke, also found the monster metaphor an apt and useful one, but turned it around: "exterminate the monster aristocracy," he wrote.[2]

The metaphor of the natural versus the monstrous was a fundamental way of constructing social reality in Burke's time. By the late 19th and early 20th century, however, the concept of the natural was to a great extent displaced by the concept of normality. For the past hundred years, normality has been deployed in all aspects of modern life as a means of measuring, categorizing, and managing populations (and resisting such management). Normality - a highly complex concept with an etiology that includes the rise of the social sciences, the science of statistics, and industrialization with its need for interchangeable parts and interchangeable workers - has been used in a remarkable range of contexts and with a bewildering variety of connotations.[3] However, two crucial and interrelated aspects of normality have been persistently overlooked. First, normality is constituted in large part in opposition to culturally variable notions of disability. Just as the natural was meaningful in relation to the monstrous and the deformed, so are the cultural meanings of the normal produced in tandem with disability. And second, the creative tension between disability and normality is a central element in the modern belief in progress.

The concept of normality in its modern sense first arose in the mid-nineteenth century in the context of a pervasive belief in progress. It became a culturally powerful idea with the advent of evolutionary theory. The ideal of the natural had been a static concept for what was seen as an essentially unchanging world, at a time when "the book of nature" was represented as the guidebook of God. Normality, however, was a dynamic concept for a changing and progressing world, the premise of which was that one could discern from the observation of human behavior the direction of human progress, or evolution, and instead use it as a guide. Its ascendance signaled a shift in the locus of faith, from a God-centered to a human-centered world, from a culture that looked within to a core and backward to lost Edenic origins, to one that looked outward to behavior and forward to a perfected future.[4]

While normality ostensibly denoted the average, the usual and ordinary, in actual usage it generally excluded only those defined as below average. "Is the child normal?" was never a question that expressed fear about whether a child had above average intelligence, motor skills, or beauty. Abnormal signified the sub-normal.[5] In the context of a pervasive belief that the tendency of the human race was to constantly improve itself, that, barring something out of the ordinary, humanity moved ever upward away from its animal origins and toward greater perfection, normality was implicitly defined as that which advanced progress (or at least did not impede it). Abnormality, conversely, was that which pulled humanity back toward its past, toward its animal origins.

Physical or mental abnormalities were commonly depicted as instances of atavism, reversions to earlier stages of evolutionary development. Down's Syndrome, for example, was originally called Mongolism by the doctor who first identified it in 1866 because he believed the syndrome to be a biological reversion of Caucasians to the Mongol racial type.[6] Teachers of the deaf at the turn of the century spoke of making deaf children more like "normal" people and less like savages and animals by forbidding them the use of sign language and worked to prevent deaf marriages with a rhetoric of evolutionary progress and decline.[7] Recent work on freak shows has highlighted how disability and race have intersected with an ideology of evolutionary hierarchy.[8] James W. Trent argued in a recent paper that displays of "defectives" alongside displays of "primitives" at the 1904 World's Fair signaled similar and interconnected classification schemes for both individuals and races seen as inferior; people with disabilities and people of other races

were both placed on evolutionary hierarchies constructed on the basis of whether they were seen as "improvable" or not - capable of being educated, cured, or civilized.[9] As Martin Pernick has told us, a doctor in 1916 could justify allowing a disabled infant to die by describing it as "An inferior animal! A lower form! An imbecile!"[10]

The constant companion to the belief in progress was the fear of decline and a primary signifier of decline was the disabled body. To combat this threat to human progress, eugenics enthusiasts such as University of Chicago sociologist and progressive reformer Charles Henderson argued for sterilizing the abnormal: "accidental and sporadic deflections downward from the average would still occur; but one of the principal causes of race-deterioration would cease at the source."[11] As the minister and best-selling author Josiah Strong wrote at the turn of the century, "the race cannot be perfected without perfecting the body."[12]

Disability has represented a danger to progress and evolution and thus one of the greatest threats of the progress-defined modern era. The bright future of the modern world has been typically imagined as a place where everyone would be intelligent, youthful, strong, and independent, stand upright and tall, be of "sound mind and body," and live free from defect and disease. As the dark shadow of this vision of the future, disability was at the core of the American construction of both the past and the future.

Progress has frequently been depicted since the late 19th century as a matter of increasing purity, a process of ridding the world of contaminants and imperfection. "Eugenic," literally meaning "well-born," was used to imply not just purity of heredity, but by extension a more expansive and general notion of purity. A Chicago politician in 1915, for example, billed himself as the "eugenic candidate," meaning not that he had superior ancestry or was in favor of eugenics, but that he was pure and uncorrupted. Withholding life-saving surgery from disabled infants was promoted early in the century by calling the practice "the Greater Surgery - the surgery that cuts away the vileness and decay and leaves only the sweet and clean and wholesome in this life of ours."[13] The goal of the "pure oralism" movement was deaf education uninfected by any trace of gestural communication. The "moral purity" crusades of the early 20th century were a struggle against "degenerates" usually depicted as "feebleminded." Notions of purity formed a constellation around the idea of progress, a constellation that in its more extreme manifestations led, in the United States, to sterilization and eugenic euthanasia campaigns, and in Germany, to mass killing of "defective" individuals and members of "races" prone to be "defective."

It is no coincidence that as faith in this future, in never-ending progress, has waned in recent years, so has the concept of normality lost cultural potency. The 1950s probably saw the height of the ideology of normality and also the first signs of a general reaction against it. The 1960s rebellion was in part a rebellion against the regime of normality, against an oppressive sense of conformity, sameness, facelessness. The "man in the gray flannel suit," the corporate and government bureaucrat, the suburban "little boxes that all look the same," became symbols of what was wrong with modern life. As it loses its cultural value, the ideological uses of normality have become easier to see and to challenge (which is perhaps one factor in the emergence of the disability rights movement). As one of the central organizing ideas of the modern era, we cannot understand the historical forces that have shaped modernity without coming to terms with normality. Since the idea of normality, even under challenge as it is, still wields enormous cultural force, we cannot effectively advocate social change without understanding its continuing

influence. And we can do neither without understanding the role that disability has played in its construction.

The ideology of normality, and the study of disability as a basic element in its constitution, has implications well beyond disability studies per se. Studies in race, ethnicity, and gender have demonstrated that these cultural categories are constructed as binary oppositions with one side posited as a universal norm and the other as a deviation from the norm - that is, the universal male versus the deviant female, the normal European American as opposed to the abnormal African, Asian, or Native American. What has not yet been explored, however, is how disability is used to constitute these binary oppositions. Disability has functioned historically as a justification for inequality not just for disabled people, but covertly for women and minority groups as well. It may be that to some extent all social hierarchies rely upon culturally constructed and socially sanctioned notions of disability.

For example, immigration laws at the turn of the century used disability to limit the entry of national and racial groups said to be prone to physical, mental, and moral degeneracy. While exclusion based upon national origin were controversial and problematic (the Chinese were the only nationality ever specifically barred from entering the country), denying immigration on the basis of disability was not. Thus, legislation could, against little opposition, refuse entry to "foreigners who are idiots, imbeciles, weak-minded persons, epileptics, lunatics..., as well as those who, though not included in the above-mentioned classes, shall be judged by the doctor who examines them as deficient mentally or physically." The assumptions informing such laws illustrate the intersection of nationality and disability in configuring the concept of the undesirable immigrant. The attempts by eugenicists during this same period, in the United States and elsewhere, to prevent the reproduction of people considered to be inferior types centered on disability and made manifest the intersection of disability with race and ethnicity. Immorality and criminality were both believed to be the direct result of "defective intelligence, defective emotions or a combination of both defects."[14] The equation of moral wrong with biological wrong was not merely the medicalization of deviance, but a tendency to conceive of evil as embodied.

Opponents of political and social equality for women cited their supposed physical, intellectual, or psychological flaws, deficits, or deviations from the male norm. These flaws - irrationality, excessive emotionality, or physical weakness - are in essence mental, emotional, or physical disabilities, although they are rarely discussed or examined as such. As Cynthia Eagle Russett has noted, "women and savages, together with idiots, criminals, and pathological monstrosities," all of whom were considered to be cases of arrested evolutionary development or atavism, were "a constant source of anxiety to male intellectuals in the late nineteenth century."[15] Whether it was individual atavism or a group's lack of evolutionary development, the common element in all was the presence or suspected presence of disability.

Furthermore, disability has figured not just in arguments <u>for</u> the inequality of women and minorities, but also in arguments <u>against</u> those inequalities. Such arguments do not deny that disability is an adequate justification for social and political inequality, but rather deny that the groups in question have these disabilities. Thus, a popular theme in women's suffrage posters and articles was to contrast strong, upright women with "degenerate" men identified as "idiots" or "lunatics" and to ask rhetorically whether it is right to place women in the same category with such people, those who are <u>justifiably</u> denied social and political rights.[16] Women as well as racial

and ethnic minorities angrily reject accusations that their group might be characterized by negatively viewed physical, mental, or emotional deviations from the desirable norm believing that these legitimately pose a threat to their social and political rights. Oppressed groups do not challenge the basic construction of the hierarchy but instead work to remove themselves from the negatively marked categories, to disassociate themselves from those who "really are" disabled. People with disabilities have also used this strategy. Deaf people throughout the 20th century have tried to avoid identifying themselves as disabled people knowing that it tends to invite and justify discrimination. The desire of many with mildly stigmatized disabilities to distance themselves from people with more highly stigmatized disabilities is a common phenomenon. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson notes, "disabled people also often avoid and stereotype one another in attempting to normalize their own social identities."[17]

This widely used strategy for attaining equal rights, which tacitly accepts the legitimacy of disability as a justification for inequality, may be one of the key factors responsible for making discrimination against people with disabilities so persistent and the struggle for disability rights so difficult. Indeed, attention to disability as a category of historical analysis may support the conclusion that identity politics - that is, liberationist movements centered on particular groups - are necessarily oppressive to other groups. The struggle for disability rights may require challenging basic and widely accepted notions of social hierarchy. If so, a successful disability rights movement will be very subversive indeed.

## ENDNOTES

1. Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," American Historical Review 91 (December 1986), 1053-1075.

2. Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France ("Books-on-Line" internet edition): rhetoric of monstrosity, see pp. 13-14, 63, 118-19, 261, 355, 384, 396, 412; blindness see pp. 70, 89, 171, 308, 378; imbecility and madness see 165, 173, 217, 346, 394, 419, 444, 448. Tom Paine, The Rights of Man ("Books-on-Line" internet edition), 86; see also 12, 15.

3. Ian Hacking, The Taming of Chance, (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 160-166; Francois Ewald, "Norms Discipline, and the Law," Representations 30 (Spring 1990): 146, 149-50, 154. See also Georges Canguilhem, The Normal and the Pathological (Zone Books, 1989).

4. On the concept of normality within discourses concerning deaf people and sign language, see Douglas Baynton, Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language, (University of Chicago Press, 1996), chapters 5 and 6.

5. In the late 19th century, educators of the deaf began using the term "normal child" as the counterpart to "deaf child" instead of the "hearing" and "deaf" of previous generations. In this case, "normal" appears to refer to an average since the "average" person is hearing. However, since it does not exclude those with extra-sensitive hearing it does not merely denote the average, but all those above a certain standard.

6. Daniel J. Kevles, In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity, (University of California Press, 1985), 160.

7. Forbidden Signs, chapter 2.

8. See James W. Cook, Jr., "Of Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P.T. Barnum's 'What is It?' Exhibition," and Nigel Rothfels, "Aztecs, Aborigines, and Ape-People: Science and Freaks in Germany, 1850-1900," in Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, (New York University Press, 1996).

9. James W. Trent, "Defectives at the Fair: Constructing Disability at the 1904 Saint Louis World's Fair," unpublished paper Society for Disability Studies Annual Meeting, June 1996, Washington D.C.

10. Martin S. Pernick, The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of 'Defective' Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915, (Oxford University Press, 1996), 79.

11. Trent, "Defectives at the Fair," 14.

12. Quoted in Ronald Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America, (Oxford University Press, 1990), 263.

13. Pernick, The Black Stork, 54, 74.

14. Kevles, In the Name of Eugenics, 73.

15. Cynthia Eagle Russett, Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood, (Harvard University Press, 1989), 63.

16. Lisa Tickner, The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14, (University of Chicago Press, 1988),
illustration IV.

17. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature, (Columbia University Press, 1997), 15. Thomson's fascinating and important book, which came out just as I was completing this article and which does what I am calling for here, uses feminist theory to explore how unequal power relations are grounded in representations of physical difference.

## The Origins of a Legislative Disability Category in England:A Speculative History

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Introduction

Disability theorists have increasingly employed historical arguments in their attempts to explain the contemporary exclusion of people with impairments from the mainstream of Western industrial societies. Social model theorists in particular have evoked a broadly materialist narrative of British economic history which suggests that the transition to an industrial mode of capitalist production was the key causal factor in excluding disabled people from participation in the labour force.

Morris (1969) focuses on the operation of nineteenth century labour markets in excluding people with learning difficulties from the mainstream of society while Topliss (1979: 11) notes the differential impact of industrial production on people with sensory impairments. Ryan & Thomas (1980: 101) stress the impact of mechanised production norms in the new factories. Similarly, Finkelstein (1981) speculates that people with physical impairments would have remained relatively well incorporated within their communities until the Industrial Revolution. Oliver